

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Moving Policy Theory Forward: Connecting Multiple Stream and Advocacy Coalition Frameworks to Policy Cycle Models of Analysis

Michael Howlett

Simon Fraser University and National University of Singapore

Allan McConnell

University of Sydney

Anthony Perl

Simon Fraser University

The stages/policy cycle, multiple streams, and Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) approaches to understanding policy processes, all have analytical value although also attracting substantive criticism. An obvious direction for research is to determine whether the multiple streams framework and the ACF can be refined and applied to other dimensions of policy-making set out in the policy cycle model. This article argues that extending and modifying Kingdon's framework beyond the agenda-setting stage is best suited to this endeavour. Doing so makes it possible to bring these three approaches into alignment and enhances our understanding, although retaining the core insights of each.

Key words: *Kingdon, policy cycle, stages approach, multiple streams, advocacy coalition framework*

Introduction: Policy Process Conceptualising and Policy Studies

A pivotal feature of policy studies since the mid-1980s has been the development and use of several different analytical frameworks to help capture the main characteristics and dynamics of policy processes (Pump 2011). These frameworks are oriented toward moving beyond the particularities of policy-making processes in such a way as to guide investigators and help both students and practitioners make sense of the complex set of socio-political activities that constitute policy-making as well as its outputs and outcomes (Althaus et al. 2013; Cairney 2013; Howlett et al. 2009). However in their

present state, these models contain contradictory elements and their use has led to many studies and scholars focusing upon or promoting one model over another in a process of 'dueling analytical frameworks'.

The longest-standing such conceptual framework is the notion of the policy process being constituted by sequential, cyclical, phases, or 'stages' of governmental problem-solving. Although many authors, including most notably those involved in the development of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) model (Sabatier 1991) called for the supersession of the stages approach and this has been tried in different ways, it lives on as the dominant heuristic applied to public policy-making

(Howlett et al. 2009). This longevity is due at least in part to a normative preference for more logical modes of policy-making on the part of many policy scholars who support a problem-solving perspective on the subject (Althaus et al. 2013). But it is also very much a result of other factors such as the simplicity of the framework and its capacity to deal with the multiple activities and the many tasks involved in policy-making, from problem definition to policy outcomes and evaluation. Rejecting criticism of *The Australian Policy Handbook* for recycling Lasswell's cyclical heuristic for understanding policy deliberations (Everett 2003), Bridgman and Davis (2003: 102) wrote in this journal that 'Policy is a series of interlocking steps, a dialogue between procedures and substance, between public debate and private analysis', a view which fits nicely within the cycle 'heuristic' (Jann and Wegrich 2007).

The problem-oriented, multiple task-oriented stages approach can be contrasted with the other current major models of policy-making that focus on particular dimensions of the subject. One prominent example of these alternatives is the 'multiple streams' framework and its 'garbage can' perspective on policy-making dynamics found in the work of John Kingdon (1984) and his devotees (Zahariadis 1995; Zohlnhöfer et al. 2015). Studying policy-making through the lens of several semi-independent 'streams' of events and actors interacting with each other to define and control the policy agenda stresses its constant complexity, its occasional chaos, and sometimes highly contingent nature – facets sometimes lost in the cycle approach (Colebatch 2006). Similarly, a well-known and self-described alternative model to the stages approach, the ACF put forward by Paul Sabatier and his colleagues (Sabatier 1987, 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) centres on policy formulation activities and the roles played by actors sharing common beliefs in articulating and promoting specific definitions of problems and the means to solve them. This framework focuses attention upon the role of ideas, learning, and coalition behaviour in policy-making. It contains both instrumental and non-instrumental

components and brings to policy studies an emphasis on the significance of these aspects of policy-making, which orthodox models of policy cycles tend to ignore or downplay.

Although some scholars have urged a simple direct extension of the multiple streams approach to cover all policy-making activities, Kingdon's model cannot simply be transplanted directly to explain non-agenda setting dynamics. Despite the occasional reference to other stages, its overwhelming focus is on agenda-setting and an 'idea whose time has come' (Kingdon 2011: 1). It is also unclear that the ACF in the form developed by Sabatier and others can offer satisfactory insights into important aspects of policy-making such as the mechanics of the ratification or rejection of policy options, or the administrative politics of program implementation.

Rather than engage in a process of contrasting these frameworks with each other and conducting empirical analyses intended to prove or disprove their superiority, a worthy ambition for researchers is to determine whether or not Kingdon's framework or the ACF can explain as many aspects of policy-making as the policy cycle model and thereby replace it as the most general overall depiction of policy-making, or whether they in fact deepen our insight into the various stages of the policy process, serving thereby to supplement rather than replace the cycle model.

As this article will argue, if they are to advance thinking about policy-making, both the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) and ACF approaches to understanding policy process need revision if they are to apply to the post-agenda setting and post-formulation activities involved in policy development and implementation. Specifically, this article argues that a reconciliation of streams, advocacy coalition, and cycles models only becomes possible once it is recognized that neither the multiple streams model nor the ACF, as presently constituted, can deliver fully functional frameworks capable of understanding the entirety of policy-making activity and behaviour. That is, neither alternative on its own can match the analytical scope and range of the policy cycle approach. Rather than being understood as conceptual rivals,

therefore, we argue that each model can bring complementary and cumulative insights into how policies are made and thus yield further appreciation of the policy process as a whole, enhancing the utility of the cycle framework by addressing astute and longstanding criticisms of its lack of clear and realistic agency, oversimplified depictions of policy deliberation, and obscure drivers of change (Colebatch 2006; Sabatier 1991). In other words, a combination of elements from each model can advance both policy thinking and the policy cycle framework's application, more usefully than does the existing penchant toward the continued reinforcement of the duelling frameworks idea.

Duelling Policy Frameworks: Stages, Multiple Streams, and Advocacy Coalitions in Historical Perspective

The policy cycle approach is arguably the most enduring conceptual construct in the policy sciences (Burton 2006; deLeon 1999; Weible et al. 2012). Although the stages or cycle framework has many detractors (e.g. Colebatch 2006; Sabatier 1991) who have argued that it presents an idealized image of sequential policy-making activity rarely encountered in practice, it has retained a significant role in many policy scientists' examination of policy-making for well over six decades. This longevity and continued use and re-use in the face of a series of challenges cannot simply be ignored. The reasons for this must be carefully analysed and their implications brought forward into any attempt to integrate or synthesize aspects of alternative models and frameworks.

The origins of the cycle model date from the earliest works on public policy analysis, and particularly those of pioneering scholars in the policy sciences such as Harold Lasswell. The analytical goal of simplifying the complexity of public policy-making by developing and applying metaphorical accounts of its fundamental processual and cyclical nature originated in Lasswell's earliest works (Lasswell 1956, 1971). Based on his direct observations of policy-making processes in the United States, he deconstructed the policy-making process

into several discrete stages – seven in this case including intelligence gathering, promotion, prescription, invocation, application termination, and appraisal – corresponding with the sequence of tasks involved in conceptualizing the creation of and outputs of government.

Lasswell's work was highly influential and formed the basis for many later approaches and numerous permutations of his original stages framework (e.g. Brewer 1974; Lyden et al. 1968; Simmons et al. 1974). This idea of a sequence of policy tasks and behaviour received varying treatment in the hands of different authors following in this tradition. Later studies attempted to retain the parsimony and explanatory power of a multi-staged process model of policy development although refining it into a smaller number of distinct stages associated with applied problem-solving activity; such as, in Brewer's (1974) case, invention/initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, and termination. The model ultimately evolved into the now ubiquitous 'cycle' construct of five main 'stages' of policy-making: from agenda-setting and policy formulation through decision-making to policy implementation and evaluation (Althaus et al. 2013; Howlett et al. 2009; Jann and Wegrich 2007).

Importantly, the later changes to the model introduced by Brewer and deLeon (1983) and others added a dynamic component to the original stages approach by incorporating feedback processes into it: thus presenting policy-making not just as a 'staged process' but as an on-going iterative one: a 'policy cycle'. This insight inspired several new versions of the stages perspective in the 1970s and 1980s. The most well-known were set out in popular textbooks by Charles O. Jones (1984) and James Anderson (1975), which adopted an explicitly problem-solving orientation toward the subject. Each model put forward slightly different interpretations of the names, number, and order of stages in the cycle but retained the same fundamental staged-feedback cycle architecture and problem-solving focus (Howlett et al. 2009).

Although the cycle model remains prominent in the policy sciences pedagogy and research, it now competes with alternative approaches to

understanding the policy process (Sabatier and Weible 2014). These more recently developed, but still more than 30-year-old frameworks, vie for the crown of most favoured conceptual approach to explaining public policy.

One such approach has received far-reaching and enduring attention from scholars both within and beyond the policy sciences is the ‘multiple-streams’ model most popularly associated with John Kingdon’s (1984, 2011) work on US congressional agenda-setting. In this model, quasi- or semi-independent ‘multiple streams’ of political, problems and policy (solutions), events, and activities periodically flow together across realms.

The problem stream in this model contains perceptions, opinions, and attitudes held by various members of the public and policy communities (Mukherjee and Howlett 2015). These pertain to whether some problems are essentially public in nature and cannot be resolved through private initiative and thus require government action, as well as perceptions about the merits of past government efforts to resolve related challenges. The policy stream carries recommendations from researchers, advocates, analysts, and others in a policy community examining problems and using their (sometimes self-proclaimed) expertise to propose prospective solutions to them (Voß and Simons 2014). The political stream is stocked with contextual attributes such as the composition of ideas and values comprising national ‘moods’ and the power shifts produced by legislative and executive turnover following events such as elections and cabinet shuffles that rotate the composition of policy-makers and affect important events through the composition of political and legislative timetables (Stimson 1991). Kingdon’s operative idea was that in certain circumstances, sometimes driven by institutional events such as budgetary or legislative deadlines, or by focusing events such as airplane crashes or earthquakes, these streams would join together to provide a window of opportunity for entrepreneurs to move their preferred issues and solutions onto government agendas (Birkland 1997, 1998). Although the exact timing of some of these occurrences might be fortuitous, at other times they would be more or

less predictable, such as immediately following an election (Howlett 1997).

Kingdon’s ideas about policy streams touched a chord in the policy sciences and were quickly seized upon and used to describe and assess case studies such as the nature of US foreign policy-making (Woods and Peake 1998); the politics of privatization in Britain, France, and Germany (Zahariadis 1995; Zahariadis and Christopher 1995); the nature of US domestic anti-drug policy (Sharp 1994); the collaborative behaviour of business and environmental groups in certain anti-pollution initiatives in the United States and Europe (Lober 1997); and the overall nature of the reform process in Eastern Europe (Keeler 1993), among other subjects.

In this understanding, policy development did not occur automatically or spontaneously in response to a social problem as Lasswell seemed to suggest. Rather it emerged in a more complex and contingent fashion as the result of the interaction and intersection of the three streams, which led to certain issues being taken up by governments and not others, defining their agendas and future activities. In this framework, important policy events occur at critical junctures, thanks to the initiative of specific kinds of actors – policy entrepreneurs – who link together policy problems, solutions, and their surrounding political aspects; leveraging various kinds of ‘focusing events’ and ‘windows of opportunity’, which provide the possibility of generating the initiative and momentum needed to begin a policy process (Mintrom 1997; Mintrom and Norman 2009).

Although this is a powerful and parsimonious way of conceptualizing and understanding the many different kinds of actors and activities that go into problem definition and the beginning of policy deliberations in government, what has often been lost in the discussion and application of this model in the period following Kingdon’s work, is that in its original version, the framework was not used to interpret all aspects of policy-making. Rather, Kingdon defined his task quite narrowly and only sought to explain how issues moved onto government agendas and became targets for action, rather than how, for example, solutions were

decided upon and implemented or put into action (Barzelay 2006; Guldbrandsson and Fossum 2009; Howlett et al. 2014).

Another prominent contender for the analytical crown of policy studies that also developed at around the same time is the ACF. As is well known, the ACF was developed by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins Smith in a landmark series of articles beginning in the mid-1980s; around the same time that Kingdon's work appeared (Sabatier 1987, 1988). Unlike Kingdon, who did not engage directly with rival theories of policy-making, Sabatier did so with gusto. He offered a trenchant critique of the policy cycle framework, for example, which he condemned for lacking '... a causal theory [because it] ... contains no coherent assumptions about what forces are driving the process from stage to stage and very few falsifiable hypotheses' (Sabatier 1991: 145). Although finding some continuing use for the cycle approach as a 'stages heuristic' that could help illustrate the different activities which went into policy-making, Sabatier argued that the cycle framework 'lacked agency' and misled by suggesting a more linear and logical progression of policy activities existed than could be observed in practice. The ACF essentially posited that focusing on the beliefs motivating collective action within a subsystem would generate a superior understanding of the conflict inherent within policy-making by comparison to the 'actorless' vision of the staged approach.

Although Kingdon drew his empirical evidence for interpreting agenda-setting from the deliberations of the United States Congress, Sabatier grounded his search for a more satisfactory way of understanding policy dynamics in the policy formulation work of America's state and federal bureaucracies. The principles of the ACF were induced from extensive content analysis of public input records into federal rule making on environmental and natural resource policies, and associated Congressional hearings as well as case studies of policy-making in areas such as agriculture and the environment in California (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998).

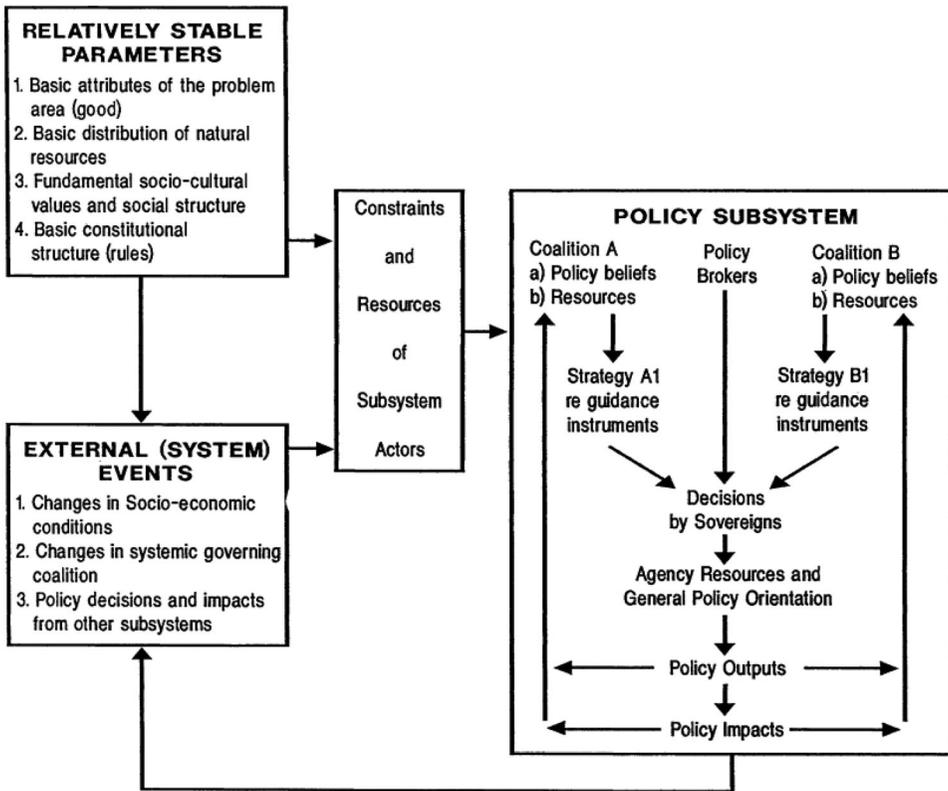
Whereas Kingdon's units of analysis for discovering the causes of stasis and change on the

policy agenda were the heterogeneous forces and factors that converged upon Congress, Sabatier and his colleagues focused on political actors as the drivers of policy development. But rather than rely on the classic vehicle of pluralist group interaction as a mode of collective action (Truman 1971), or the amorphous issue network concept that had been proposed by Hecló (1977), Sabatier and Jenkins Smith created the ACF, an analytical structure in which like-minded actors formed competitive teams within each policy subsystem, contending to either change policy formulation or maintain the status quo (see Figure 1).

Like Kingdon, Sabatier postulated a much messier policy process than typically envisioned by problem-centered cycle theory, one in which duelling coalitions of actors vied to have their policy-related ideas adopted in practice. In this framework, the gravitational pull that draws actors into a particular coalition is exerted by core beliefs, grounded in deeply held normative values about the way the world worked, or should work, but communicated and contested through what Sabatier (1988: 145) termed 'near (policy) core beliefs' regarding the subsystem's legitimate goals. The political rivalry between these coalitions over time served to establish the contours and content of policies. Policy-making was thus much less about a sequence of problem-solving activities on the part of disinterested actors, than about how coalitions formed, engaged their competitors, and about how that process established hegemony over problem definitions and policy alternatives (Weible 2005; Zafonte and Sabatier 1998).

Although helpful in specifying who was involved in policy-making and how they interacted, however, the strength of the ACF formulation came at the expense of ignoring the decision-making process and reverting to a pre-Lasswellian 'black box' in which the inputs formulated by a successful coalition somehow were melded together to produce policy outcomes. This is apparent in the formulation of the ACF framework of policy-making presented above (see Figure 1) whereby decisions simply emerge from the contestation of advocacy positions and implementation exists

Figure 1. The ACF Framework



Source: Sabatier (1998: 102)

only as a policy output. Policy evaluation was seen to exist as a form of learning (Bennett and Howlett 1992) in which feedback from outputs affects subsequent inputs, but this vision was not clearly linked to the ACF belief structures set out above.

For most of the time, the different origins, foci, and language used in these three contending ‘meta-theories’ have precluded their reconciliation, let alone synthesis or integration (Cairney 2013). In a separate article, however, we have urged scholars to reconsider this rivalry and re-assess the utility of connecting these conceptual frameworks together by extending Kingdon’s ‘streams’ approach to other stages of policy-making such as formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (Howlett et al. 2015). The logic and reasons for doing so are set out below, along with

the elements of an integrated framework capable of uniting these two conceptual constructs with the ACF model; combining the strengths of each and reaching beyond their individual limitations in better describing, explaining, and understanding policy-making activity.

Reconciling the Three Perspectives on Policy-Making

As noted above, many researchers have suggested proceeding through a simple extension of the multiple streams frameworks to encompass all phases or activities of policy-making within a three-stream model (politics, policy, and problem) (Barzelay 2006; Zahariadis 2003). However, this is not a simple matter. Kingdon’s core assumption of the existence of

only three streams, for example, is impossible to apply to other stages of policy-making beyond agenda-setting such as implementation or evaluation when other central actors such as program administrators and policy analysts are active. To accomplish a reconciliation of the conceptual pillars of the multiple-stage and cycle models, we have argued elsewhere, that a five-stream framework which retains the conceptual architecture and analytical vocabulary developed by Kingdon, offers a more comprehensive and capable framework for capturing the full range of policy-making dynamics (Howlett et al. 2015).

We present the details of this enhanced framework below, and go on to extend its reach through considering the coalition activity of the ACF as a vehicle for transmitting political (and other) beliefs into sovereign ratification, and then implementation of the outcomes of policy decisions. Although beliefs are important in affecting coalition behaviour, and some members may remain wedded to their advocacy coalition regardless of the direction that a government decides to pursue, other policy participants can be drawn into a coalition by the material and symbolic resources offered by government once a course of action has been chosen. Some recruits to a belief system may support coalition ideas more because of their support for organisations and political leaders, than for the principles inherent in those ideas.

A First Step: Reconciling Multiple Streams Theory with the Policy Cycle Framework

This analysis of the limitations of each model suggests a strategy and means through which the limitations of each can be surmounted by combining key elements within an overall cycle rubric. As suggested above, the difficulties encountered in joining elements of these two frameworks together, originate in how the frameworks were originally conceived. This is true of the cycle analogy, which began as a static framework, before developing later to incorporate dynamic ‘feedback’ elements. Although growing in popularity, ‘stagist’ descriptions of policy processes were often criticized for presenting an assembly-line model of policy-

making without providing a clear description or explanation for what policy actors actually did during the policy-making process, and why they do what they did in any particular sequence (deLeon 1999; Sabatier 1991). The feedback processes associated with the newer conceptual design of a cycle overcame some of these concerns by subtly shifting the underlying processual analogy from mechanical action to a more ‘organic’ creation. Processes came to be viewed as the result of complex adaptive dynamics rather than as the products of functional linear logic (Howlett et al. 2009).

This emphasis on complex adaptive dynamics, of course, is not taken very far in the stages heuristic but is precisely where the multiple streams model excels (Klijn 2008; van Buuren and Gerrits 2008). Kingdon’s eclectic mix of streams, windows, and entrepreneurial metaphors was designed to explain how policy-making began and how policy problems could beget solutions and vice versa, an oft-made observation about policy-making that orthodox stages thinking deemed anomalous (Beland and Howlett 2016).

As we have seen, however, the multiple streams framework requires substantive ‘stretching’ beyond what had been envisioned by its creator to move from agenda-setting activity to encompass the entire policy process. Although the three-stream framework developed by Kingdon is well suited to understanding that specific stage of policy-making, it requires augmentation to effectively encompass the additional variables and activities affecting deliberations, actions, and outcomes occurring over multiple stages or phases of policy-making noted above.

Reformulating the multiple streams approach to take it beyond agenda-setting dynamics, as discussed below, enables a reconciliation of this model with that of policy stages. Developing an ‘enriched’ policy stream framework can fully engage with policy cycle thinking and can overcome the limitations of both constructions, although having the potential to create a much more powerful conceptual apparatus for advancing the understanding of policy-making. But mixing or integrating these two different frameworks is not a straightforward task.

Efforts to date to combine streams and cycles to generate an improved understanding of the fundamental nature of policy processes have often clouded matters by simply layering one framework on top of the other, leading to confusing or contradictory inferences. Our approach here is not to layer, but to refine, adapt, and blend.

As Kingdon acknowledged, the idea of ‘policy streams’ originated in earlier work by Cohen, March, and Olsen (Cohen et al. 1972; March and Olsen 1979) into administrative decision-making processes in complex, uncertain, and changing environments. Here it is important to recall that these earlier authors had noted the existence of *four*, not three, streams. In their 1972 article, Cohen, March, and Olsen posited: a stream of choices, which arose from the decision-making inputs of policy actors; a stream of problems, issues which had become visible in the public consciousness; a stream of solutions created by the alignment and resolution of problems, remedies, and choices; and an energy stream, comprising the time that participants devote to deciding what to do, or not to do, about policy problems. Kingdon’s framework embraced both the conceptual structure of independent streams and the substantive content of two, i.e. problems and solutions (policy). To this, Kingdon added a politics stream to capture the structural and cognitive dimensions of authority, whose power partially subsumed the energy stream. And he omitted the stream of choices, the decision-making ‘occasions when an organization is expected to produce behaviour that can be called a decision’ (Cohen et al. 1972: 3), which Kingdon chose to represent through a static metaphor (policy window) rather than a stream. Doing so is understandable because he was focusing on a single stage of policy-making in which only a discrete choice could occur: whether or not to have an item enter an official governmental policy discussion.

Determining exactly how many ‘streams’ of events exist across all dimensions of policy-making and identifying how they operate through all stages of the policy process, can provide a logic of stream intersection that can be applied to movements between each stage or decision point. A version of the streams framework that is promising in this respect involves

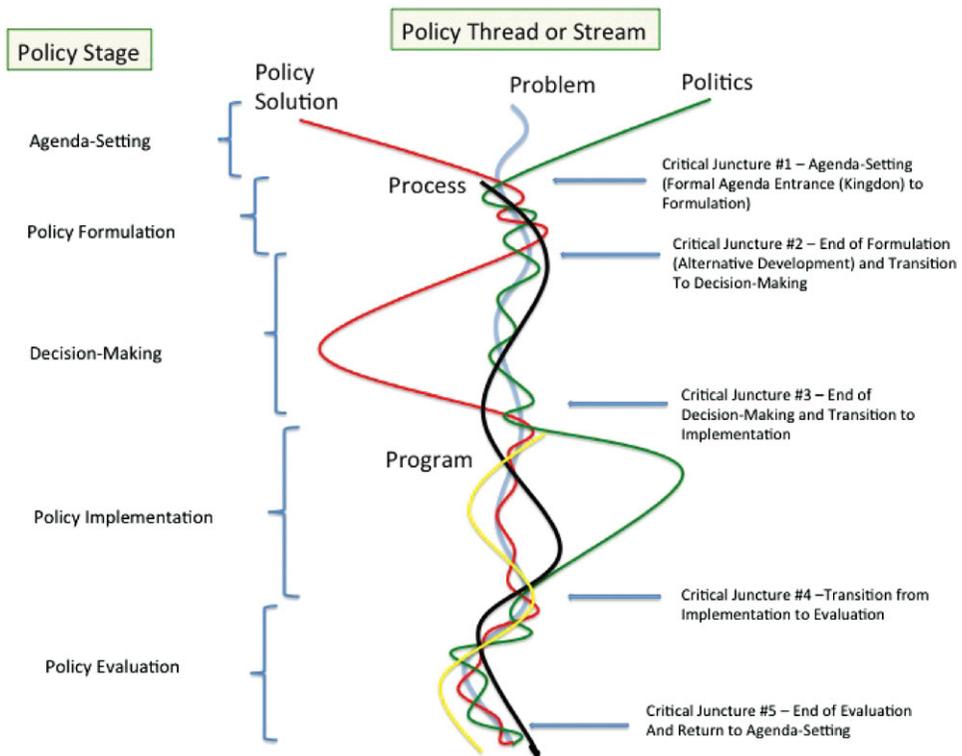
thinking about policy-making as a sequence of phases – much as in the stages-cycle framework – in which critical ‘confluence and distribution’ points among policy streams are linked to specific ‘stages’, in the same way as various tributaries to a river merge at different points into the river as it makes its way downstream (Howlett et al. 2015). This framework begins with the classic Kingdonian articulation of problem, policy, and political streams affecting agenda-setting but adds in new process and program streams that feed into specific conjunctures where the existing streams intersect or coalesce as the policy process unfolds (see Figure 2).

In this five-stream framework, each confluence point brings something new (new actors, new tactics, new resources) joining the flow of policymaking events. Where each stream intersects, the merger point represents a ‘window’ in Kingdon’s sense, and yields a different configuration of policy inputs that generate a distinct policy pattern through each particular juncture much as the ‘rounds’ style of policy-making theories have suggested (Klijn and Teisman 1991; Timmermans 2001).

In this way of thinking, the first confluence point occurs in agenda-setting much as Kingdon suggested, when the three problem, politics, and policy streams coalesce temporarily in the typical ‘policy window’ fashion that he described. This intersection creates a new policy process stream that becomes the main or central pathway upon which other streams subsequently converge. In turn, critical junctures are created that set up the future impetus for policy deliberations and establish the initial conditions, which animate subsequent policy process advances (or retreats) essentially becoming the ‘choice’ stream mooted by Cohen, March, and Olsen.

After this critical agenda-setting process has occurred, in many jurisdictions the political stream separates from the problem and policy streams as specific sets of subsystem actors such as policy analysts and stakeholders organized in advocacy coalitions contribute to deliberations and propose policy alternatives (Craft and Howlett 2013). This mobilization of ideas about what to do continues until a

Figure 2. Five-Stream Framework of the Policy Process



second critical point occurs once these actors have blended policy problems and solutions together creating a configuration of alternative choice possibilities. The contents of this range of choices provide the basis for a new phase when the politics streams returns to connect with the process stream creating momentum toward a decision.

The third critical point occurs if and when a decision is taken and a policy then requires implementation. At this point the ‘policy’ stream separates from the main flow, which is comprised of the process, politics, and problem streams, and is now joined by a program stream composed of the actors and interests working to calibrate new program instruments (and integrating or alternating them with established ones) to generate new outputs. This program stream’s sustained focus on policy implementation embodies a good part of what Cohen, March, and Olsen had in mind for their energy stream, where policy actors’ time commit-

ment to a relationship between problems and solutions was encapsulated. Once these outputs have accumulated for a time, the ‘policy’ stream rejoins the other streams when evaluation occurs.

This connection between streams and cycle frameworks can encompass qualitatively different kinds of policy-making occurring at each intersection point, depending on exactly what inputs each stream brings to a particular moment in the policy-making process. Such an openness to diverse inputs offers the kind of insight into policy-making that draws upon the analytical strength and persistence of the stages-cycle idea, although escaping the limitation that the absence of program or policy feedback streams created for earlier efforts to link the stages framework with ‘streams’ thinking. Unlike the stages framework, however, which is not immediately clear about why each stage occurs or in what order different parts of the cycle come about, the five streams framework

not only explains how and why this happens as new actors, ideas, and interests merge into an existing policy flow, but also explains the different patterns of policy-making that result from the presence or absence of relevant inputs at different critical junctures.

This way of thinking integrates the actors and behaviours Kingdon identified in his agenda-setting study, but does so well beyond that task of policy-making. Among other things, it addresses many of the concerns Sabatier (1991) and others have voiced about the 'actorless' or 'agentless' character of many orthodox cycle interpretations and uses.

A Second Step: Reconciling the ACF Framework with the Revised Multi-Streams Policy Cycle Framework

Even the five-stream framework would remain very much a bloodless analytical construct, however, without taking the step of specifying not only who the actors are within each stream, but also what they bring to the conjuncture with other streams and how they operate and interact to produce the policy outcomes and characteristic features of the policy process (Mukherjee and Howlett 2015). It is here that the ACF approach can inspire conceptual advances by grounding policy-making in the ideas and beliefs held by key actors about what is to be done at particular moments of policy-making. Connecting the focus of the ACF on ideas to the cycle-stream framework set out above, although expanding it to explain each stage of policy-making, adds further insight into policy processes and outcomes. It also generates a superior framework for understanding policy-making, beyond either of the other two, either alone or in combination.

As with the Multiple Streams model, the ACF should not, as many scholars including Sabatier have alleged, be thought of as a replacement for policy cycle analysis but rather considered, as deLeon argued, a refinement of and advance upon the policy cycle (deLeon 1999). Following advocacy efforts throughout the stages of policy development reveals important insights into the interplay between beliefs and behaviour within a policy formation pro-

cess, which strict adherence to the ACF model, as originally formulated, does not allow.

This relationship is reciprocal, with other models helping cover weaknesses in the ACF formulation. With respect to Kingdon's model, for example, it is important to note that the ACF does not explain very well when and how the policy agenda changes. Although the logic of the model suggests that change occurs when a coalition that had not influenced policy formulation previously is able to exert its influence to overcome the preferences of the previously dominant coalition, or a coalition learns to alter its own behaviour, this activity is not conceptualized very well. Rather such shifts in subsystem structure and activity were often attributed by Sabatier et al. to exogenous shocks (e.g. economic crises, electoral realignments, or natural disasters), which were premised to be unpredictable and thus remained under-examined (Sabatier 1987, 1988). But to give such out-of-system events a critical location in the framework undermines its explanatory power or at best limits its applicability in times of 'normal' policy-making. Connecting the ACF and Multiple Streams models with the policy cycle heuristic uses the strengths of each to help fill the gaps in the others.

Explaining agenda-setting in terms of streams and subsequent policy development through the behaviour of coalitions and their interaction within and between subsystems (although engaging with ideas about policy problems and solutions) helps shed light both on the links between agenda-setting and formulation activities as well as their translation into decision-making and implementation stages of policy-making (Wilder and Howlett 2014).¹ In this sense it is very useful to introduce ACF-type subsystem thinking and concepts into the five-stream framework, which in itself (as we have demonstrated above) can be integrated with the stages/cycle approaches. Doing so allows us to conceive of streams interacting throughout multiple phases of the policy process, not in a 'bloodless' and impersonal fashion, but in a vibrant politicized manner as competing coalitions of interests vie for dominance not least in trying to ensure the primacy of their beliefs and ideas. In particular, it brings to the

fore in a more holistic fashion three modes of thinking, which otherwise would not have been possible in the hitherto largely mutually exclusive duelling frameworks of cycles, streams, and coalitions.

We are using the ACF perspective in such a way that we can conceive of a stream being shaped to some degree by competing coalitions of interests within a policy subsystem. The problem stream, for example, is shaped to a substantial degree by the outcome of the interactions by competing coalitions of interests (from scientific experts to lobby groups and public servants) who seek others' acceptance of their authoritative definition of the 'policy problem'. Similarly, the process stream is shaped by coalitions who will often contest the most appropriate process that should follow from consultation with citizens or key interests. Such routes may for example include whether to opt for a referendum or purely an executive decision on a high-profile issue, as well as concerns about the best administrative practices to follow in implementing policies (Mukherjee and Howlett 2015).

Following on from this point, this same stream/coalition logic can be applied to all stages of the policy process. At the implementation stage for example, there is likely to be a powerful advocacy coalition of interests that shapes the process stream (broadly, the procedure for implementation) and the program stream (the specific policy instruments and their calibration). The outcome may range from classic and idealized top-down implementation where the dominant coalition has secured little or no wiggle room for 'street level bureaucrats' and others involved in the implementation process, to a much more contested implementation process. In terms of the latter, competing coalitions would vie over procedure (perhaps contesting through the courts) and/or fine program detail with perhaps very different interpretations of which micro-instrument best ensures achievement of goals such as equity, efficiency, or effectiveness (Howlett et al. 2009).

We can also conceive of innumerable interactions between stages/streams and coalitions in different contexts. For example, at the evalu-

ation stage of a highly controversial policy, we can imagine competing coalitions attempting to secure the dominant narrative reflecting on all stages of the policy process. With reference to each of the five streams, questions different coalitions' members might address include: did we address the right *problem*? Why was one policy *solution* chosen over an equally viable option? Did key *political* interests promoting the dominant policy option have the public interest at heart? Should we not establish a more robust consultation *process* that took on board the views of stakeholders rather than ignore them? Could we not commit more funding to the *program*?

Utilizing a combination of stages, streams, and coalitions thus not only has the potential for providing a more integrated and holistic understanding of policy, but also its diversity and flexibility provides room for better encompassing creativity, inventiveness, art, and craft within policy-making. These are all core attributes of strong policy analysis that are often 'modeled-out' of policy studies and thinking (Wildavsky 1987).

Conclusion: Synthesizing and Moving Forward

Current policy theory, as Peter John (2012) has reminded us, relies heavily upon works created in the late 1980s and early 1990s, if not earlier, which despite much case study and comparative research that has questioned or challenged many of their assumptions and predictions, have not moved very far beyond the original ideas advanced in the writings of this era.

As both John (2013) and Cairney (2013) have argued, one way out of the conundrum of multiple, competing frameworks attempting to explain the same set of facts is to stop viewing them as mutually exclusive or competitive constructs. This article engages in a process of conceptual adjustment and reconciliation, which such a viewpoint calls for, suggesting terms and ways through which these three meta-frameworks of policy-making processes can be

usefully connected to offset their criticisms and provide a generally superior model of policy-making to any taken on its own.

Linking the streams and stages models to the ACF frameworks move this process forward. It highlights the interactions between and among streams of events and retains the essence of Kingdon's 'fluid' dynamics although better accommodating the full range of tasks involved in policy development. Such a framework retains the basic thrust and vocabulary developed by Kingdon although combining it with the more comprehensive cycle framework, capturing many more of the activities that affect public policy-making and beyond.

Furthermore, rather than serving as a competing approach to understanding policy-making, the ACF model can also be seen to contribute to the effectiveness of joining up the multiple-stage and multiple streams models by clarifying the nature of the actors, activities, and motivations at each stage and conjuncture of policy-making. Streams, windows of opportunity, and critical moments are concepts that better help conceptualize who subsystem actors are and how they interact over the policy cycle, than the simple coalition structure developed in the original ACF framework.

The research possibilities involved in working with this new framework are enormous, once we begin to see the value in adapting and combining the core insights of stages, streams, and coalition approaches, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive. A new synthesis allows us to meld together analytical approaches that focus on different stages of policy processes, the interplay of multiple forces that shape these processes, and the competition between different sets of actors (and beliefs) as they vie for influence.²

Single case studies focusing on specific phases of the policy process, or specific streams and their interactions with others and in specific contexts such as election campaigns, scandals, and new governments coming to power would be useful. For example, one can imagine the value of a research study examining a controversial commission of inquiry (in effect, an evaluation stage) with competing coalitions of interests including scientific experts, citizens,

lobby groups, media, seeking to build coalitions in an attempt to secure the dominant narrative, which runs through reflections on all the streams and all the stages. Studies that straddle multiple stages of the policy process would also help explore policy dynamics over time within particular policy subsystems.

Cross-case comparison, within and across countries, is also possible and useful. Let us imagine two countries with a similar policy subsystem X and a similar dominant solution stream at the formulation stage driven by a powerful advocacy coalition. A research agenda around the issue of why, in one country, this coalition fragments at the implementation stage with an alternative coalition able to dominate the political stream, whereas in another country policy implementation is much smoother and the dominant coalition is routinely able to maintain its dominance throughout all stages of the policy process, would also help refine and advance policy process theory beyond its present state.

Endnotes

1. It is important to note in this regard that Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) posited most subsystems would have two to four Advocacy Coalitions competing to formulate, or reformulate, policy strategies, goals, and objectives. They suggested these policy contests would foster social learning that reinforced coalition dynamics through 'relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioral intentions which result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment (or revision) of policy objectives' (Sabatier, 1988: 133). Schlager (1995) suggests another important dimension of social learning within advocacy coalitions, that of obtaining material benefits from policy through the pursuit of collective action. Such rewards offer both a positive reinforcement to the successful advocates, who believe that they have done well by doing good, in addition to a motivation to members of the, as yet, unsuccessful coalition(s) who see the dividends from further collaboration.

2. This then sets the stage for possible further integration with the IAD and PET frameworks, which describe aspects of implementation activity and empirically driven characterizations of the outcomes of policy process behaviour; two other frameworks, which developed around the same time. The former helps spell out many aspects of policy design work undertaken in the policy process while the latter joins with paradigm theory in describing outputs as either incremental or transformative (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Baumgartner and Jones 1991).

References

- Althaus, C., P. Bridgman and G. Davis. 2013. *The Australian Policy Handbook, 5th ed.* Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Anderson, J. E. 1975. *Public Policy Making.* New York: Praeger.
- Barzelay, M. 2006. 'Introduction: The Process Dynamics of Public Management Policymaking.' *International Public Management Journal* 6(3):251–282.
- Baumgartner, F. R. and B. D. Jones. 1991. 'Agenda Dynamics and Policy Subsystems.' *Journal of Politics* 53(4):1044–1074.
- Beland, D. and M. Howlett. 2016. 'How Solutions Chase Problems: Instrument Constituencies in the Policy Process.' *Governance*, forthcoming.
- Bennett, C. J. and M. Howlett. 1992. 'The Lessons of Learning: Reconciling Theories of Policy Learning and Policy Change.' *Policy Sciences* 25(3):275–294.
- Birkland, T. A. 1997. *After Disaster: Agenda Setting, Public Policy and Focusing Events.* Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Birkland, T. A. 1998. 'Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting.' *Journal of Public Policy* 18(1):53–74.
- Brewer, G. D. 1974. 'The Policy Sciences Emerge: To Nurture and Structure a Discipline.' *Policy Sciences* 5(3):239–244.
- Brewer, G. and P. deLeon. 1983. *The Foundations of Policy Analysis.* Homewood, CA: Dorsey.
- Bridgman, P. and G. Davis. 2003. 'What Use is a Policy Cycle? Plenty, if the Aim is Clear.' *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 63(3):98–102.
- Burton, P. 2006. 'Modernising the Policy Process: Making Policy Research More Significant?' *Policy Studies* 27(3):172–192.
- Cairney, P. 2013. 'Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: How Do We Combine the Insights of Multiple Theories in Public Policy Studies?' *Policy Studies Journal* 41(1):1–21.
- Cohen, M., J. March and J. Olsen. 1972. 'A Garbage Can Framework of Organizational Choice.' *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17(1):1–25.
- Colebatch, H. K. 2006. *Beyond the Policy Cycle: The Policy Process in Australia.* Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Craft, J. and M. Howlett. 2013. 'Policy Advisory Systems and Evidence-Based Policy: The Location and Content of Evidentiary Policy Advice'. In S. Young (ed.), *Evidence-Based Policy-Making in Canada* (pp. 27–44). Toronto: University Of Toronto Press.
- deLeon, P. 1999. 'The Stages Approach to the Policy Process: What Has It Done? Where Is It Going?' In P. A. Sabatier (ed.), *Theories of the Policy Process* (pp. 19–34). Boulder: Westview.
- Everett, S. 2003. 'The Policy Cycle: Democratic Process or Rational Paradigm Revisited?' *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 62(2):65–70.
- Gulbrandsson, K. and B. Fossum. 2009. 'An Exploration of the Theoretical Concepts Policy Windows and Policy Entrepreneurs at the Swedish Public Health Arena.' *Health Promotion International* 24(4):434–44.
- Hecl, H. 1977. *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Howlett, M. 1997. 'Issue-Attention and Punctuated Equilibria Frameworks Reconsidered: An Empirical Examination of the Dynamics of Agenda-Setting in Canada.' *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 30(1):3–29.
- Howlett, M. 1998. 'Predictable and Unpredictable Policy Windows: Institutional and Exogenous Correlates of Canadian Federal Agenda-Setting.' *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 31(3):495–524.
- Howlett, M., M. Ramesh and A. Perl. 2009. *Studying Public Policy: Policy Cycles & Policy Subsystems.* 3rd ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Howlett, M., A. McConnell and A. Perl. 2015. 'Streams and Stages: Reconciling Kingdon and Policy Process Theory.' *European Journal of Political Research* 54(3):419–434.
- Jann, W. and K. Wegrich. 2007. 'Theories of the Policy Cycle'. In F. Fischer, G. J. Miller, and M. S. Sidney (eds.), *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics and Methods* (pp. 43–62). Boca Raton: CRC Press.

- John, P. 2012. *Analyzing Public Policy*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.
- John, P. 2013. 'New Directions in Public Policy: Theories of Policy Change and Variation Reconsidered.' Paper presented at the International Conference on Public Policy, Grenoble, 26–28 June, Available from bit.ly/IovKxbF [Accessed 12 February 2016].
- Jones, C. O. 1984. *An Introduction to the Study of Public Policy*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Keeler, J. T. S. 1993. 'Opening the Window for Reform: Mandates, Crises and Extraordinary Policy-making.' *Comparative Political Studies* 25(4):433–486.
- Kingdon, J. W. 1984. *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Kingdon, J. W. 2011. *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. Boston: Longman.
- Kiser, L. L. and E. Ostrom. 1982. 'The Three Worlds of Action: A Metatheoretical Synthesis of Institutional Approaches'. In E. Ostrom (ed.), *Strategies of Political Inquiry* (pp. 179–222). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Klijin, E.-H. 2008. 'Complexity Theory and Public Administration; What's New? Key Concepts in Complexity Theory Compared to Their Counterparts in Public Administration Research.' *Public Management Review* 10(3):299–317.
- Klijin, E. H. and G. R. Teisman. 1991. 'Effective Policymaking in a Multi-Actor Setting: Networks and Steering'. In R. J. in 'T. Veld, L. Schaap, C. J. A. M. Termeer, and M. J. W. van Twist (eds.), *Autopoiesis and Configuration Theory: New Approaches to Societal Steering* (pp. 99–111). Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Lasswell, H. D. 1956. *The Decision Process: Seven Categories of Functional Analysis*. College Park: University of Maryland.
- Lasswell, H. D. 1971. *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences*. New York: American Elsevier.
- Lober, D. J. 1997. 'Explaining the Formation of Business-Environmentalist Collaborations: Collaborative Windows and the Paper Task Force'. *Policy Sciences* 30:1–24.
- Lyden, F. J., G. A. Shipman, R. W. Wilkinson and P. P. Le Breton. 1968. 'Decision-Flow Analysis: A Methodology for Studying the Public Policy-Making Process'. In P. P. LeBreton (ed.), *Comparative Administrative Theory* (pp. 155–168). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- March, J. G. and J. P. Olsen. 1979. *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.
- Mintrom, M. 1997. 'Policy Entrepreneurs and the Diffusion of Innovation.' *American Journal of Political Science* 41(3):738–770.
- Mintrom, M. and P. Norman. 2009. 'Policy Entrepreneurship and Policy Change.' *Policy Studies Journal* 37(4):649–667.
- Mukherjee, I. and M. Howlett. 2015. 'Who is a Stream? Epistemic Communities, Instrumental Constituencies and Advocacy Coalitions in Public Policy-Making.' *Politics and Governance* 3(2):65–75.
- Pump, B. 2011. 'Beyond Metaphors: New Research on Agendas in the Policy Process.' *Policy Studies Journal* 39:1–12.
- Sabatier, P. A. 1987. 'Knowledge, Policy-Oriented Learning, and Policy Change.' *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 8(4):649–692.
- Sabatier, P. A. 1988. 'An Advocacy Coalition Framework of Policy Change and the Role of Policy-Oriented Learning Therein.' *Policy Sciences* 21(2/3):129–168.
- Sabatier, P. A. 1991. 'Toward Better Theories of the Policy Process.' *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24(2):144–156.
- Sabatier, P. A. 1998. 'The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Revisions and Relevance for Europe.' *Journal of European Public Policy* 5(1): 98–130.
- Sabatier, P. and H. Jenkins-Smith. 1993. 'The Advocacy Coalition Framework: Assessment, Revisions, and Implications for Scholars and Practitioners'. In P. A. Sabatier and H. C. Jenkins-Smith (eds.), *Policy Change and Learning: An Advocacy Coalition Approach* (pp. 211–36). Boulder: Westview.
- Sabatier, P. A. and C. M. Weible (eds.). 2014. *Theories of the Policy Process*. 3rd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, a member of the Persus Books Group.
- Schlager, E. 1995. 'Policy Making and Collective Action: Defining Coalitions within the Advocacy Coalition Framework.' *Policy Sciences* 28(3):243–270.
- Sharp, E. B. 1994. 'Paradoxes of National Anti-Drug Policymaking.' In A. David, R. W. Cobb, and R. W. Cobb (eds.), *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda* (pp. 98–116). Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Simmons, R. H., B. W. Davis and R. J. K. Chapman. 1974. 'Policy Flow Analysis: A Conceptual Framework for Comparative Public Policy Research.' *Western Political Quarterly* 27(3): 457–468.

- Stimson, J. A. 1991. *Public Opinion in America: Moods Cycles and Swings*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Timmermans, A. 2001. 'Arenas as Institutional Sites for Policymaking: Patterns and Effects in Comparative Perspective.' *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 3(3):311–337.
- Truman, D. B. 1971. *The Governmental Process; Political Interests and Public Opinion*, 2nd ed. New York: Knopf.
- van Buuren, A. and L. Gerrits. 2008. 'Decisions as Dynamic Equilibriums in Erratic Policy Processes.' *Public Management Review* 10(3): 381–399.
- Voß, J.-P. and A. Simons. 2014. 'Instrument Constituencies and the Supply Side of Policy Innovation: The Social Life of Emissions Trading.' *Environmental Politics* 23(5):735–754.
- Weible, C. M. 2005. 'Beliefs and Perceived Influence in a Natural Resource Conflict: An Advocacy Coalition Approach to Policy Networks'. *Political Research Quarterly* 58(3):461–475.
- Weible, C. M., T. Heikkilä, P. deLeon and P. A. Sabatier. 2012. 'Understanding and Influencing the Policy Process.' *Policy Sciences* 45(1):1–21.
- Wildavsky, A. 1987. *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Wilder, M. and M. Howlett. 2014. 'The Politics of Policy Anomalies: Bricolage and the Hermeneutics of Paradigms.' *Critical Policy Studies* 8(2):183–202.
- Woods, B. D. and J. S. Peake. 1998. 'The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Agenda-Setting'. *American Political Science Review* 92(1): 173–184.
- Zafonte, M. and P. Sabatier. 1998. 'Shared Beliefs and Imposed Interdependencies as Determinants of Ally Networks in Overlapping Subsystems.' *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 10(4): 473–505.
- Zahariadis, N. 1995. *Markets, States, and Public Policy: Privatization in Britain and France*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Zahariadis, N. and S. A. Christopher. 1995. 'Ideas, Networks, and Policy Streams: Privatization in Britain and Germany'. *Policy Studies Review* 14(1/2):71–98.
- Zahariadis, N. 2003. *Ambiguity & Choice in Public Policy: Political Decision-Making in Modern Democracies*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Zohlnhöfer, R., N. Herweg and F. Rüb. 2015. 'Theoretically Refining the Multiple Streams Framework: An Introduction.' *European Journal of Political Research* 54(3):412–418.